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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 000137

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TAGS: PGOV PINR SOCI KDEM PHUM IZ  
SUBJECT: KARBALA CANDIDATES MANEUVER FOR ADVANTAGE

REF: BAGHDAD 130

Classified By: PRT Team Leader Don Cooke for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This is a PRT Karbala reporting cable.

¶1. (C) Summary: Few incumbent Provincial Council (PC) candidates are popular, but we expect a number to retain their seats because they are buying votes. The campaign of Governor Aqeel Mahmoud al-Khzali, a member of the Da'wa party, was caught by television reporters in the act of purchasing support. Da'wa is expected to do well in the elections, in part because the local head of the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) is a member. Nevertheless, ISCI is fighting vote-buying fire with fire, and we expect several new names to come to the fore as potential provincial leaders. Unlike in 2005, there is no feeling among Karbalans that the balloting is being stage-managed by the United States. End Summary.

Soccer, Anyone?

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¶2. (C) Sponsorship of sporting events, particularly soccer matches, is a means used by Karbala's politicians to curry favor with constituents. Acting PC Chairman Abd al-Al al-Yasiri, for example, is notorious for arranging soccer matches and distributing free tickets in order to create the impression that the public supports his pro-Iran stance on most issues (reftel). Yasiri is not the only prominent -- and widely disliked -- incumbent buying votes to ensure his reelection. Governor Aqeel, who many contacts tell us is blamed for the provincial government's failure to meet the citizens' expectations for improved public services, also has used the soccer-match mechanism for purchasing support. Unfortunately, Aqeel neglected one of the cardinal rules in exchanging money for support: Buy off the media first.

Candid Camera

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¶3. (C) Last week, the Da'wa-affiliated Governor, whose campaign posters feature Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's likeness as well as his own, announced that he would sponsor a soccer match on January 17. Thousands of tickets were given away in poor neighborhoods in south Karbala; women in particular were targeted and told they would receive 50,000 Iraqi dinars (about \$42.50) for attending. Campaign staffers implied that, along with Aqeel, Maliki also would appear.

¶4. (C) On the day of the match, the small stadium, normally the haunt of under- and unemployed men and idle (male) youths, was filled by a crowd estimated at 2,000. Approximately 700 black-clad women attended the match, looking for money and Maliki. Informed the Prime Minister in fact was not coming, the women were instructed to wait until after the match -- and the Governor's halftime speech -- to line up in front of a female staffer to turn in their jinsiyahs (identification cards). These, they were told, would be returned in a day or two along with the promised cash. At the match's conclusion and before joining the

queue, several women were stopped and interviewed on-camera by two local female television reporters. (Note: One of these reporters later visited with the PRT and shared video clips of the proceedings. End note.) The women expressed their disappointment at Maliki's failure to appear and candidly explained that the main reason they had come was to receive money. Asked if being paid by Aqeel's campaign would make them vote for the Governor, most of the women replied, yes, why not? No other candidates were giving them money. All but one of the women expressed indifference when queried about Aqeel's qualifications for office, the sole exception being a woman who -- the reporters later established -- was a Da'wa functionary. She raved that, thanks to the Governor, QDa'wa functionary. She raved that, thanks to the Governor, Karbalans enjoy "uninterrupted electricity, good roads, and clean water" -- all demonstrably false assertions.

¶15. (C) Seeing the women talking to the reporters, members of Aqeel's campaign panicked. A man subsequently identified as the Governor's brother, Abu Fatima, stormed over and said the women were lying. No money was promised, he insisted, and the women were acting at Iran's behest in trying to smear Aqeel's good name. The women reacted with fury, telling the reporters they could prove they were getting paid for their votes. With that, one of the reporters left with Abu Fatima to try to question the Governor while the other -- along with the camera crew -- proceeded toward an agitated mob, in the center of which a female Aqeel-campaign staffer sat collecting jinsiyahs and contact information from pushing, shouting and gesticulating women. Abu Fatima reportedly rushed back and directed the female staffer to return the stack of jinsiyahs already in her possession. As they reclaimed their identity cards, some of the women were heard

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carping that they had wasted a day coming and listening to the Governor speak -- not to mention suffering through a desultory soccer match -- all for naught. The reporters hope a news segment featuring footage of this untoward episode will air soon nationally on al-Sumeriyah channel. The Aqeel campaign is mulling their offer to interview the Governor so that he may give his side of the story.

Da'wa Domination?

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¶16. (C) The conventional wisdom in Karbala is that, despite the widespread unpopularity of incumbents and religious parties, current PC candidates affiliated with Da'wa -- which dominates the political scene here -- will do well. In part, this reasoning reflects the generally high regard in which people hold Maliki, who hails from the al-Hindiyah (eastern) region of the province. However, according to media, government and commercial contacts, there are other reasons for the party's expected success. Some point to the fact that the head of the local IHEC office, Safaa al-Musawi, is a Da'wa activist. (Note: Two of his cousins, Abbas Hamid and Mohammad Hamid al-Musawi, are Da'wa party members seeking election on the "Hope of the Two Rivers" list. Their brother, BG Ali Hamid al-Musawi, until recently was Karbala's police commander. End Note.) Top security officials such as MG Othman al-Ghanimi are known to favor Da'wa, leading to speculation they could use their powers to facilitate voting by party supporters -- and stymie opponents -- on election-day.

¶17. (C) According to local UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) representative and former governor Ali Kamonah (strictly protect) on January 18, Da'wa candidates, in addition to doling out dinars (50,000 being the standard sum), are distributing gas cylinders and blankets in exchange for support. He accused the Prime Minister of duplicity on the vote-buying issue, stating that Maliki condemned the practice in a meeting with UNAMI on January 16 but was witnessed earlier in the month in the al-Hindiyah town of Tuwayrij exchanging cash for votes with Anayza tribesmen.

Kamonah added that Saeed Abbas Jawdat al-Hasnawi, brother of former Karbala ISF commander MG Ra'ad Shaker Jawdat al-Hasnawi, also is involved in distributing money on behalf of Da'wa candidates. He noted that although Da'wa is not alone in purchasing support -- ISCI is sending backers on free trips to Iran as well as giving them cash -- Da'wa is the subject of the majority of complaints UNAMI has received concerning the practice.

¶8. (C) (Note: According to other knowledgeable contacts, Amar al-Hakim, son of ISCI leader Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, has been received "like a rock star" at rallies here, likely because he has been buying votes for 500,000 Iraqi dinars (about \$425) each, with vote-sellers also receiving a copy of the Qur'an. The contacts point to Da'wa and ISCI vote-buying as evidence of a political "war" between the two religious parties, with the prize being control of Karbala. End Note.)

#### The Early Forecast

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¶9. (C) Of the 1,279 candidates seeking election to the PC here, knowledgeable contacts in and out of government assess that only a small number, perhaps 79, are "serious" candidates who stand a reasonable chance of capturing one of the 27 seats. Interestingly, despite his electoral disadvantage from running on a one-candidate list, independent Yusif Majeed al-Haboubi -- who survived an attack on January 16 that his backers say was an assassination attempt and remains hospitalized -- is seen by many as a front-runner. A former (2003) mayor of Karbala qadah and Qfront-runner. A former (2003) mayor of Karbala qadah and current provincial government consultant, he is widely respected.

¶10. (C) Other candidates expected to do well include: Aqeel; Yasiri; the al-Musawi brothers; Abd al-Hamid al-Faraj (the only Communist Party member in the current PC, he has won praise as head of the Health Committee); Muhsen al-Kenani (a pro-business independent known for his staunch nationalism); Mohammad Sadiq al-Hir (a tribal independent and president of the provincial hotel and restaurant association); Falah Husayn Atiyah (the leading Fadhilah party member of the current PC and head of the Reconstruction Committee); Bushra Hassan Ashour (a Fadhilah member and -- as second deputy chairman -- the most powerful female in the current PC); and Jassim Wahhab Mohammad (head of the Education Committee, he is the PC's top Sadrist and is running on the "Independent Free People's Trend" list).

#### Comment

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¶11. (C) Our contacts are unanimous in stating that this election -- unlike that in 2005 -- is regarded as a purely Iraqi affair. There is no sense that the United States is stage-managing or otherwise interfering, although many are relieved to hear we will be among those observing the process and that we are working with IHEC and UNAMI to maintain ballot security. The ownership taken by Iraqis is heartening, but -- if significant irregularities or corruption are revealed -- could prove a two-edged sword, undermining nascent democratic convictions that have yet to establish firm roots here. End Comment.

CROCKER